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What a national psychology board will mean for current registrants, and what it might contribute to Australian Psychology

Abstract

The National Psychology Board will put in place a single national standard for psychology registration that will be consistent with the other aspect of the scheme - a national system for psychology accreditation. No longer will differences in standards between States and Territories be exploited, and much administrative complexity will be removed with a single national registration. Currently, there is at least one psychologist who is registered in every State and Territory of Australia - and who applies to all eight jurisdictions and pays fees of over \$1500 a year.

Keywords

contribute, might, registrants, current, mean, will, board, psychology, australian, national

Disciplines

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What a National Psychology Board will mean for current registrants, and what it might contribute to Australian psychology

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Chair, Council of Psychologists Registration Boards

The National Psychology Board will put in place a single national standard for psychology registration that will be consistent with the other aspect of the scheme – a national system for psychology accreditation. No longer will differences in standards between States and Territories be exploited, and much administrative complexity will be removed with a single national registration. Currently, there is at least one psychologist who is registered in every State and Territory of Australia – and who applies to all eight jurisdictions and pays fees of over \$1500 a year.

The National Psychology Board will be able to bring about important reforms to ensure psychology meets the expectations of the public, the promise of the profession, and internationally recognised standards. Having a national scheme in place offers the potential of new opportunities in the future, such as accreditation of all six years of psychology training, accreditation of post-university internships, national psychology competencies, and a national psychology examination. The public will be able to be better informed about psychologists' specialist qualifications through the register. Most jurisdictions are recognising the need to have accredited supervisors, and currently NSW and Queensland have accredited supervisor-training programs. It is anticipated that a process for accrediting supervisors will also become national.

For most psychologists, national registration will simply mean that their registration card will now be national rather than State-based, allowing them to practise anywhere in Australia. It is important, however, to understand the historical context in which the National Board will be operating. The Council of Psychologists Registration Boards (CPRB), the forerunner to the National Psychology Board, has been meeting in various forms since 1985. Regulation of psychology in Australia began in 1965 with the Victorian Psychological Practices Act, and the last jurisdiction enacting psychologist legislation was the ACT in 1995. A significant piece of legislation informing the CPRB was the passing of the Mutual Recognition Act, 1992 which guaranteed recognition of a psychologist's registration status, despite differences in standards, across all Australian States and Territories, and New Zealand. National registration therefore will achieve an aim of the CPRB for uniform national standards and practitioner mobility.

From the point of view of government, the registration of psychologists is not intended as a badge of their professional status, but rather recognition that psychologists can be

potentially dangerous. Registration Acts are in place to protect the public and ensure that psychologists are fit to practise. There are some 25,000 registered psychologists across Australia, a number equivalent to general practitioners of medicine. Psychologists form a very important part of the fabric of our society, and it is in everyone's interest that there be a mechanism to discover, correct or remove those who are untrained, incompetent or unethical. Registration, and reforms to registration, have been informed by public scandals. The first psychology regulation closed down Scientology in Victoria, South Australia and Western Australia in the 1960s until it declared itself a 'religion'. In the 1970s in NSW, the activities within Chelmsford Hospital, where patients died as a result of psychiatric 'deep sleep therapy', led the NSW Minister for Health to state to Parliament on the 18th May, 1988, "That human suffering occurred is not denied, nor is the fact that the Department of Health failed in its duty to protect patients from potential and real harm". The subsequent Royal Commission and Burdekin Report into Human Rights and Mental Illness criticised psychology and spurred further reform of psychology regulation and a better health care complaints system.

State-based psychology regulation has helped maintain the confidence of the public in psychology and psychologists. Each year there are over 100 complaints made by the public across Australia, and about half a dozen psychologists are deregistered for serious misconduct, with many more having conditions placed on their registration. A challenge for the National Board will be to put in place processes so that the State-based committees, who will continue to do most of the conduct and complaints handling, retain their expertise. The State-based offices need to be properly resourced, with appropriate senior psychology input, to ensure that registration decisions are made equitably and professionally. The costs of running a national scheme will need to be carefully scrutinised to reduce the burden on individual registrants. Innovation and creativity in the sector has often come from individual States, and finding a way of keeping the national system rejuvenated with new ideas will be important. Finally, the Ministerial Council, which has recently been established to approve the new scheme and any subsequent changes to it, is currently constituted to be based on a unanimous voting system. The burden to get all State and Territory Health Ministers to agree on important changes may impede the scheme, so assuring flexibility and timeliness in the system may be a challenge in the coming years of implementation and evaluation. ■